

What's Love Got to Do With It?
Rev. Dr. Durrell Watkins
John 15; 1 John 4

Let's get it out of the way.
In the gospel reading today, verse 6 sounds harsh.

The bible is so diverse, covering so many years, ideas, places, attitudes, circumstances...we can find almost everything in there. We see people being kind, and people being cruel. We see people with a generous view of God, and others who think God isn't all that nice.

In the bible we see people who are very simple, and others who are very sophisticated. Some who are fiercely loyal, and others who seem to have feet of clay. Scripture is as diverse as the human family, and that is one reason that I find it so fascinating and so relevant.

But to get the most out of the bible, we need to learn to approach the scriptures through a critical lens. Let me hasten to add that "critical" in the sense I'm using it isn't dismissive nor is it pejorative. A film critic might judge a film to be brilliant...she isn't out to trash a good piece of art, but to analyze it and discern if it is good and if so why it is good. Critics often love a film or a play or book, but only after they have dared to examine it fearlessly, asking questions of it. Such critical analysis often brings praise. So, let's not be afraid of biblical criticism...it might just be the thing that brings the scripture to life for us and proves it to be useful after all.

It was biblical criticism that led us to question homophobic assumptions and interpretations that have been used in emotionally violent ways against same-gender loving people. Such criticism brought freedom and hope and joy and gave the bible back to people who had been abused by it. The skills we learned from questioning religious homophobia can serve us well in every area of scripture study.

Chapter 15, verse six of John's gospel puts these words into Jesus' mouth: "Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned." And that passage, with others from John's gospel, has been used very abusively against non-Christians. But let's set the scene:

John's community lives in a time of great turmoil. The writer is writing almost 70 years after Jesus' execution, and almost 30 years after Jerusalem and its Temple have been destroyed. Decades of hatred and fear have plagued his community. His people may need to be reminded of their sacred value, and then they may need to be reminded that only Love can overcome hatred...only Love can heal the wounds that hatred has inflicted. But how can a person love when they have been treated so hatefully?

The writer knows people who have been arrested, beaten, incarcerated, impaled, beheaded, crucified, torn to shreds by lions. That's the reality of his world. That's the reality of his experience. A couple of centuries later, the Emperor Constantine will change the scene for Christians. Christianity becomes the state religion...no longer underground or on the margins...but that isn't the way of the world in John's time. It's a dangerous place for his people, and if he is going to move them past fear and regret and despair, he's going to have to be pretty creative.

John is being creative. He is imagining that Jesus would champion his cause. He is writing decades after Jesus said anything. He isn't recording words as they are spoken; he is reimagining the Jesus story and applying it to his audience.

We've seen that with the new Star Trek movie. J.J. Abrams has reimagined the Star Trek myth, has creatively constructed a new beginning for it, has adapted it for a new audience in a new day, but all in the spirit of the Star Trek tradition. John is doing something similar.

John has woven seven I AM statements throughout his gospel and has attributed these statements to Jesus. Today's I AM statement is I Am the true vine. And using Jesus as a symbol for the community that continues to follow in his way, John imagines Jesus saying good branches produce fruit on the vine, useless branches need to go. But as so much of John's writing is allegorical, metaphorical, symbolic...what if he's using symbolism when he says, "whoever does not abide in me is thrown away...into a fire and burned." What if the whoever, is the whatever that exists in all of us?

John's message is that God dwells in Jesus, and through ritual and story, Jesus dwells in John's community. Jesus symbolizes a god-filled life, and then to use the vine metaphor, the branches flow out of the vine. Jesus is filled with God, we are filled with Jesus as we share rituals and stories about him and reflect on his message and mission, so we, too, are filled with God. And what is God? Love!

John's bigger message is that we should abide in love and allow love to abide in us because that's what Jesus did. Jesus came to realize, or at least his followers came to realize, that Jesus was one with his divine Source...Jesus abided in love, and love abided in him...love was his divine power.

John then holds Jesus up as the supreme example...be so filled with the image of Jesus that you follow in his path. Identity with love (like he did), and when you do, love fills you and expresses as you. God is love, and whoever lives in love lives in God and God lives in them...or so we heard in 1 John 4.16.

That's the message. We are a community learning to live in the power of love. Now, John may have been thinking...a lot of people hate us, so this kind of love is radical and even dangerous. Get out of our way...love like this is hard enough without people who aren't taking it seriously. But maybe subconsciously, he was onto something even deeper.

You see, we don't all love all the time. We don't forgive our enemies easily...or maybe it's just me.

We don't see the good in everyone, especially when their behavior is unkind...or maybe it's just me.

We don't see the sacred value of every person sometimes...or maybe it's just me.

So you know what...if I want to live in the power of God, that is, in the power of unconditional and all-inclusive love, then all that is unlike love needs to be cast out of my consciousness. Prejudice, fear, resentment, rage, vengeance, arrogance...those things need to be submitted to the cleansing fire of the spirit, to be purged, or healed, so that only my best and truest self, that which is made in Love's image, remains. I don't always make it...but John believes Jesus at least came close...so until I get better at it, I can identify with one who did better than I usually do. And that brings me closer to my goal, and that brings me hope.

Whatever is keeping us from living in the healing power of love needs to go. And suddenly, John doesn't sound so reactive, so unkind, so territorial, but is instead speaking metaphorically of the issues that we all have. He is giving us hope that we can confront those issues within us, to emerge as the loving children of God we really are. To abide in the love that Christ symbolizes isn't to find something new; it's to connect with what we really are and to live in unity with the divine love that is already at the core of our being.

If we aren't living in love (and we'll know, because love is usually accompanied by peace and joy and fulfillment and gratitude)...if we aren't living in love, we are disconnected from the love vine. So, we start to get rid of what is hindering our growth, our healing, our ability to live in love, and as those obstacles are removed, we find ourselves united again with the Source, the vine, and blessings like joy and strength and comfort and hope and peace start flowing again.

John isn't scolding his community; he's reminding them of their divine potential. They are part of the true vine, the source of life, the flow of never-ending love. That's who his people are...in or out of jail cells, in or out of lions dens, in or out of court rooms, in or out trouble...they are children of God, and God is love and whoever loves has experienced God...regardless of their religious affiliation, regardless of what they call God, regardless of their sexual orientation, economic status, or nationality. Whoever loves has expressed the very nature and power of God. The true vine is the vine that produces love, and all that is unlike love isn't part of the true vine...so we confront our fears and our prejudices, and we return to love. That's the peace, the hope, the comfort John is offering. And this is the good news. Amen.

©Durrell Watkins, 2009

Divine Love is my Source.
Divine Love flows through me.
When I love, I am centered in God.
And miracles are possible in my life.
Alleluia!
Amen.

God is Love and WHOEVER lives in Love lives in God, and God lives in them.